



“The secret of concentration is elimination”
-Dr. Howard Hendricks

The Problem of Letting Go

In the opening of Elting Morison’s [*Men, Machines, and Modern Times*](#), he recounts the story of a British officer who, in the early 1940s, had a time motion expert study pictures of a light artillery crew going through their firing drills for coastal defense in an attempt to find procedures to cut in order to reduce firing times. The cannons, previously pulled by horses during the Boer War, had been repurposed for a stationary defense at coastal fortifications. Morison writes:

When he ran the pictures over once or twice, he noticed something that appeared odd to him. A moment before the firing, two members of the gun crew ceased all activity and came to attention for a three-second interval extending throughout the discharge of the gun. He summoned an old colonel of artillery, showed him the pictures and, and pointed out this strange behavior. What, he asked the colonel, did it mean. The colonel, too, was puzzled. He asked to see the pictures again, "Ah," he said when the performance was over, "I have it. They are holding the horses."

Take a second to reflect on that last line. Even though they no longer had horses pulling their cannons, they were *unable to divest of what was no longer necessary*; they continued the practice long after the horses were gone. This short vignette points out a problem that most military organizations still struggle with today.

We jump on the "priority of the week" or the latest commander's focus without looking across the organization to see what we need to stop doing. We try to do it all, even those things no one really cares about anymore. I struggled with this while I was an operations officer and an executive officer. No one wants to be the leader who says, "We can't do it!" because we all know that, inevitably, if you can't do it, there is someone else who will. But there are some repercussions to overloading our organizations.

When we fail to let go of procedures and practices, even while we take on new ones, we spread our organizations thin. The penalties for continuing to "hold the horses" aren't added seconds on firing drills; they are [100-hour workweeks](#), [strained marriages](#), [failed missions](#), or the [loss of integrity](#).

Letting Go of the Horses

So what can we do about it? Andy Stanley, a pastor and leadership author, says that organizations should continually ask the following question: *Where are we manufacturing energy?*

He believes that most organizations have trouble divesting, and thus people begin to manufacture energy to keep up a practice that is no longer valid. We have to deliberately look at the requirements, practices, and processes to see what is no longer necessary for the organization to excel. In doing so, he says, we can reinvest our time, resources, and money into those things we need to be doing.

For military leaders, a good time to do this would be while doing mission analysis on quarterly and annual Unit Training Plans (UTPs). As units prioritize their training and focus

areas, they should look at what practices are no longer necessary to achieve the desired end-state. The commander can then formalize their cancellation in a portion of the published guidance titled “Things We Will No Longer Do.”

Also, when those “priorities of the week” come up, staffs should look at their running estimates and present the commander with recommendations for divestments so the organization can actually prioritize for that week instead of putting in 100-hour workweeks.

Taking It a Step Further

A [2008 HBR article](#) recommends that leaders invest the same amount of energy in divestiture as they do investments. The authors argue that creating a team of people in the organization focused on divestiture will ensure that the process receives the same effort as other initiatives (which usually equate to taking on more).

A commander could establish a short-term operational planning team to review multiple aspects of the organization and continually assess the return on investment of various practices.

And When You Do

When you finally let go of the horses and divest, you will find that your organization is in a better position to accomplish those tasks that actually matter. Leaders won't feel the burnout that comes with 100-hour workweeks, subordinates will see that the organization cares, and productivity will actually increase.

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